

Holiness in the Body of Jesus

Hebrews 10:5–10

Friends in Christ, grace and peace from the Lord and Saviour who came on that First Christmas and who is to come again.

Christmas is just around the corner. So, I ask, are you ready for Christmas? Maybe, or as some like to say... as ready as it can be...

Well, no excuse, because the Advent season was supposed to be a time of preparation, right? But that's ok, as said last Sunday, Christmas has different tones for different people, so goes the preparations. However, if you have prepared something, or somethings... here is another question. Have you done all you needed to do to get ready, whatever, celebrations at home perhaps? But there is still another question, and this one applies to all, as we celebrate Christmas, is your heart ready and good enough, holy and perfect, even worthy to meet Jesus? After all the One we are waiting for is perfect and holy, and if we are to meet him, we need to be perfect too. He himself even commands us to be so, as he said it during his sermon on the Mount: "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Mat. 5:48)

You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect! There you have it. For us to encounter a perfect God, we must be perfect ourselves. Aaa... I think we are in trouble now. Because if you ask me, I'm not perfect, nor holy. Those who know me closely, will agree with that!

Yet, in the Christian world, there are denominations, congregation and preachers who argue that for you to meet Jesus, you need to be perfect first. You must strive for holiness yourself. We must sanctify ourselves if we are to be called Christians, spiritually mature and more, and if we want to be saved. We must then sanctify ourselves by following their rules and regulations: how to behave, how to speak, how to conduct ourselves, what to eat or not eat, what to drink and not drink, and so on, if not, then we then will not be saved... That's what some other congregation teach, that when a believer steps out of the sanctification process, meaning doesn't follow their man-made rules, his or her salvation is seen as jeopardized.

Sanctification is seen as mortifying the deeds of the flesh, cleansing impure motives and thoughts of the mind and heart as well as glorifying the Father through worship, obedience and works of love. Now, these things, of course we need to do. Of course we need to live sanctified lives. In fact our Christian life should be different from that of the world. But whatever we do is not to please God for the sake of salvation, rather to for the praise of God who has saved us already. Doing so to please God for salvation we have a name for it. It's called works of righteousness, self righteousness.

But aren't we supposed to be holy? To be sanctified? Yes, absolutely we are supposed to be holy and sanctified. Meaning, with no sin, "without spot or wrinkle or any such thing..." (Eph. 5:27) Paul says to the Ephesians in his letter. Ok, so how then are we supposed to do that?

The work of sanctification, the work of making us holy, is not our work, but his. And his alone! After all, as the Scriptures teach us, God alone is holy. He's not like us, he is undefiled, and free from the stain of sin and death. No other god and nothing within creation is holy like our God.

Yet this holy God—the one who made man in his image, who created everything out of nothing, and who still preserves it all to this day by his grace—this holy God desires above all that you, too, would share in his holiness. Because he is the one, he is the one alone who can make us holy. The letter to the Hebrews tells us: “And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” In other words, Jesus, Jesus is the one who makes our sanctification, our holiness, possible. And he is here today, saying I want to sanctify you.

Of course, there's much that stands in the way of his holiness—first and foremost, our sin. We're not only unholy; we're also unclean. Defiled without and within—in thought, word, and deed—what right do we have to share in his holiness? What right do we have to draw near to God, to approach his holy presence, to be sanctified, sharing in his holiness? None at all.

No one comes before God on his own terms, with his own plans, by his own means or merit, no matter how great it may seem at the time. But none of this stops God from coming to you, making you holy, and giving you access to him, and he has his particular way of doing it. A way that has always been, through a body. Yes! A body!

God has always made his people holy, and he's always done so with a body. That's how he did in the Old Testament. The whole sacrificial system at the tabernacle and temple was all about that: the atoning for Israel's sins and drawing his people near to him, making them holy through the sacrifice of a body.

And just like today, Israel never was nor ever could be holy in themselves. They could never be totally like God, sanctified and perfect. So, God shared his holiness with them, they were given to draw near to him, be separate with him, and reflect his holiness to the world. “For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:45) God told them.

But the only way to approach this holy God was on his terms, according to his Word, by the means that he so graciously established for them. All the rules and rituals of timing, location, and animal—everything laid out was so that Israel could draw near to God and that he might sanctify them.

There's no works righteousness in the Old Testament. Nor there was a different God either. Salvation is always and only through faith in Jesus Christ. Holiness is always a participation in his presence, sanctified by his Holy Spirit. But the way we're given to approach him and share in his presence differs, differs in the means. In the Old Testament it came through the bodily sacrifice of animals, bulls and goats; now it's by bread and wine, water and Word. Before it was by daily, monthly, and yearly offerings; now it's by one Baptism and the ongoing feeding at the altar and hearing the preached Word.

The letter to the Hebrews doesn't deny that the saints of old were sanctified by their sacrifices. But it does strongly warn against going back to what is old when the new has come! “Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.’ Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book’” (vv 5–7).

Why would he change his mind on this? He didn't change his mind rather it was a shadow of what was to come. The fact is that people concentrated on the outward appearances rather than a change in the heart. Doesn't matter how much we do

outwardly if there is no change in the heart. Rituals don't matter unless God is doing the work, even changing our hearts. Only then rituals do make sense.

And what was to come was Jesus body. As you see when Christ came into the world, he came taking a body. And with this body he came to do the will of God—to atone for the sins of the world and sanctify all who would believe in him.

But why a body? Why not just forgive the world? Why not simply thunder a word of forgiveness from heaven, avoiding the messiness of flesh and blood? Well, as it was of old, so it always will be. To forgive and make holy requires a body because it requires blood. And without blood there is no forgiveness. It says in Leviticus, "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life" (Lev. 17:11). And the letter to the Hebrews says the same: "Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (9:22).

In the old covenant, the blood of bulls and goats was offered repeatedly to sanctify the people. But now Christ has come. And the body prepared for him was a body prepared for death, for the shedding of blood, for the forgiveness of sins and sanctifying of his people. And that's what makes hearts ready for Christmas, after all Christmas is all about the coming of One body, Jesus Christ.

It was never the body and blood of animals that took away sins or gave access to God's holiness. But it was through these that the atoning work of Jesus was given to them. They were if you wish their means of grace then. They were types, figures, and means of God's grace, delivering the One whose blood alone forgives sin. No wonder the body and blood of these animals were so central to the worship of God's people!

But when Jesus came, everything changed. His body offered on the cross, and the blood that flowed from his hands and feet, this was the once-and-for-all sacrifice. This was the real deal, the real sacrament, the opening of heaven, the forgiveness of sins won for the whole world. Here, in the body of Jesus, we have full and final access to God; here we share in his holiness.

So why go back to the old ways? God doesn't delight in sacrifice for the sacrifice's sake. There's nothing unique to the blood of bulls and goats. And God certainly never intended for anyone to trust in the sacrifice itself but rather to look to him who promised to sanctify by his Word, through these slain bodies and shed blood.

When he said "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "Behold, I have come to do your will." He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (vv 8–10)

God wants to sanctify his people. He wants to make you holy. For that he needs a body—a body prepared for him that he might offer it once and for all. Through him and his offering we have access to God; we're invited to share in his holiness. The old is gone; the new has come. Sacrifices and offerings no longer grant access to God, but here he comes to you today.

Now you see why we rejoice! And rejoice greatly because He gives you his body and his blood with this bread and this wine. Again, he speaks his promise of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Here he draws close to you that you might be found

with him. He has come to do the Father's will. He has come to make you holy, for he is holy. So take and eat the very body of Christ given for you. Amen.